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ABSTRACT

In late 1988, Midland College in Texas implemented a desktop publishing service to produce instructional aids and reduce and complement the workload of the campus print shop. The desktop service was placed in the Media Services Department of the Learning Resource Center (LRC) for three reasons: the LRC was already established as a campus-wide support facility and a place to seek creative assistance and development of teaching aids; the LRC was a neutral location not perceived as "belonging" to any group; and desktop publishing enhanced existing services provided by the LRC such as graphics, artwork, and photography. After much deliberation, a desktop publishing system was chosen that included a 286-based computer, a standard color monitor, Aldus PageMaker software, and an optional flatbed scanner. Once the basics of the system were learned, it was possible for the staff to produce mini-posters, modify and print original drawings or graphics, and produce camera-ready typeset copy in a variety of fonts. When initiating a desktop publishing service, it is important to: (1) recognize that it takes time to learn the system; (2) inform faculty and staff about what the service can and cannot do; (3) choose a system that is compatible with those already used at the college; (4) purchase all system components from the same vendor; (5) learn the basics of the system before purchasing additional software; (6) educate production staff in the basics of typesetting, graphics, and design; (7) build a portfolio of the paper copies of finished work in addition to storing them on disk; and (8) establish a realistic production schedule. Desktop publishing can provide a college with a wealth of promotional and instructional materials at a fraction of the cost of commercial printing. (WJT)

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by David Drake

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DESKTOP PUBLISHING AS A LEARNING RESOURCES SERVICE

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David Drake

Desktop publishing can be a valuable college support service. Its potential uses in higher education include the production of attractive schedules, flyers, brochures, invitations, and countless other variations on the print medium. For the classroom, striking overhead transparencies, handouts, and many other instructional aids can be rapidly designed and produced from original or secondary materials.

At Midland College, we implemented a desktop publishing service in late 1988 to produce the above items as well as to complement and reduce the load on our campus print shop. Herein lies an important point: while desktop publishing can provide many of the services traditionally handled by campus or commercial print shops, it cannot be expected to supplant those operations entirely (more about this later). The Media Services department of the Learning Resource Center was chosen as the location for the desktop service for several reasons. First, the LRC was already established as a campus-wide support activity and the place to come for creative assistance and development of teaching aids. Second, the LRC was a neutral location not perceived as "belonging" to any one individual or group. Finally, desktop publishing meshed with and enhanced existing services provided by the LRC such as graphics, artwork, and photography.

Buying a desktop publishing system can be intimidating for novices. The respective backgrounds of the author as a librarian and his media director as an artist hardly qualified us as experts for this task, but after reading the obligatory articles and ads and

sitting through several vendor demos, we felt sufficiently confident to draft bid specifications for a system. We concluded that a 286-based computer offered ample power for our needs and was a better value than the more glamorous and more expensive 386-based machine. Our initial choice of a high-resolution monochrome "portrait" monitor, so named for its oversized vertical orientation, proved to be inoperable for primary operations, a fact that escaped and baffled even our experienced vendor. After much distress, we exchanged it for a standard color monitor. We had better luck in selecting our laser printer, since all of the major brands offer consistently high quality and the ability to use a wide variety of typefaces. Our choice of Aldus PageMaker software over Ventura Publisher was based strictly on bid price; both offered a widely-accepted and viable package. The final component of our system, a flatbed scanner, was optional but highly desirable. With its ability to import preexisting text and visuals, the scanner exponentially increased the capabilities of our desktop system.

Other than the early problems with our first monitor, our experience to date has been generally positive. Despite vendors' claims of dazzling desktop masterpieces being produced after only a few hours of apprenticeship, the systems do take time to learn. It is helpful, though not essential, if one is conversant with the fundamentals of typesetting, copy fitting, and graphics design. Once competent in the basics, an operator may combine desktop publishing with existing services to expedite the final product. A mini-poster can be created, laser-printed, reproduced in quantity on a standard photocopier, and mounted on campus bulletin boards and kiosks in less than an hour. Using facsimile in combination with desktop publishing, an original drawing or photo can be scanned, modified, printed, and

faxed to the desired recipient in a matter of minutes. The now-archaic method of manual pasteup and mailing could take several days to deliver the same product.

When initiating a desktop publishing service, it is important to educate faculty and staff as to what the service can and can't do, especially since some will mistakenly assume that it replicates a full-service print shop. Desktop publishing can produce excellent camera-ready typeset copy in a variety of fonts with or without creative graphic enhancements. With the use of a scanner, images can be imported and modified as desired. However, desktop publishing cannot yet provide magazine-quality reproduction of photos, although this may soon be possible. Laser printers should not be expected to do volume printing, since they are relatively slow and expensive on a per-copy basis; instead, they should be used to produce high-quality originals for reproduction by commercial printers or office photocopiers.

Other tips we can offer based on our experience with this exciting medium include:

1. Pick a system that is right for your college. This may seem an obvious statement, but many factors enter into the selection of a system. An "all-IBM" college would be well advised to stay with a DOS-based system, just as a college whose standard is Apple/MacIntosh would experience fewer problems by purchasing Apple hardware and software. After your service becomes well-known, faculty and others will begin to bring their processed text to you on their floppy disks; if their operating systems are the same as yours, the text can often be imported without having to be rekeyed, especially if it

was originally done on one of the major word processing programs.

2. Where possible, purchase all components of the system from the same vendor. Otherwise, vendors will tend to blame any "bugs" or "glitches" on the other fellow's hardware or software. This was the single greatest problem we encountered in our early days of learning the system.
3. Learn the basics of the system before purchasing additional software. Many beginners are talked into buying extra software packages which tend to be overpriced and may later prove to be redundant or of little use. Also, there are expanding sources of "public domain" (not copyrighted) software available at little or no cost. In the Midland College Media Services department, we have been building a "library" of public domain software for desktop publishing as well as general computer applications. Be forewarned, however, that the quality of public domain software can vary considerably; while some of it is excellent, some of it is nearly worthless.
4. Production staff who are not familiar with the basics of typesetting and graphics should begin to educate themselves in these areas concurrent with learning the desktop publishing system. A working knowledge of the principles of design, whether acquired through natural talent and intuition or by training, is essential for the production of aesthetically pleasing work. Most first efforts in desktop publishing will tend to be

overdone, i.e., too many fonts and point sizes will be combined with too much graphic embellishment. This is probably a natural consequence of the excitement that most novices feel when producing their early documents, but a little restraint will go a long way toward improving the appearance of the finished product.

5. Build a portfolio of the "hard" (paper) copies of your finished work in addition to storing them on your fixed disk or floppy. This not only shows off your work, but also serves to inspire those clients who have only a vague idea of what they want you to produce for them. It can also save work for the production staff, since many finished works may serve as a basic template for others.
6. Establish a realistic production schedule for your own benefit as well as for your clients. The teacher who suddenly demands a routine but extensive document with two hours' notice during a busy workday is not being fair to the staff or other clients. Desktop production schedules should allow for the completion of quality work without unreasonable deadlines, but enough flexibility should be built into the schedule to allow the occasional truly urgent item to be done ahead of routine material.

Desktop publishing, imaginatively implemented, can provide a college with a wealth of promotional and instructional materials at a fraction of the cost of commercial printing. Even more exciting, it can inspire creative input from all levels on campus once the flexible, accessible nature of the service is appreciated.

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